

A Methodological Framework for Comparative Studies of Public Debate

Håkon Larsen

Introduction

In this article I put forward a methodological framework suited for national comparative analysis of deliberation over publicly disputed issues. The interest lies in how actors involved in deliberation use language and how language influences possible ways of relating to issues under debate. The framework is developed on the grounds of an analysis of the debate on the future of public service broadcasting in Norway and Sweden (Larsen, 2011a), but it is applicable to debates about other topics as well. The framework is suited for analysis of debates not only in mass- and social media, but also in group discussions (both public, e.g. seminars, and non-public, e.g. contexts constructed by the researcher) as well as interviews with actors engaged in the issues at hand. This is due to the focus being on language instead of the media (although language of course is a medium in itself). The interest lies in how the language used can be related to the social, cultural and political traditions of the units included in the study.

I do not share the critique of methodological nationalism (Beck, 2006). On the contrary, I think it is important to continue to develop our methodological tools for conducting national comparative studies. Even though we live in an ever more globalized world, global phenomena are portrayed and discussed within national contexts. Variations in how this is done make for interesting insights into how national cultures and traditions influence contemporary social life.

In developing this framework I combine critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995a, 1995b), with repertoire theory, in particular the work of Michèle Lamont and Laurent Thévenot (2000). Norman Fairclough is one of the main proponents of critical discourse analysis (CDA). He positions himself within a critical theory

tradition (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999). Repertoire theory is a relatively new French and American research tradition for approaching culture as a repertoire, where one views social actors as free to use elements of the repertoire when engaging in meaning-making activities (Silber 2003; Larsen 2013). Below, I will give a short presentation of these theories before moving on to the presentation of the analytical framework.

Discourses and Repertoires

According to Fairclough (1995a, 1995b), every communicative event consists of three elements that must be analyzed in order to carry out a critical discourse analysis: the text, the discursive practice and the social practice. With regard to the text, one investigates the linguistic construction of genres and discourses. Concerning the discursive practice, the focus is on how the text is produced and consumed, particularly through inter-textuality and inter-discursivity. Finally, regarding social practice, the focus is on the partly non-discursive social and cultural relations and structures which constitute the frame for the discursive practice. These three elements stand in a dialectical relationship to each other.

While one usually thinks of social practice as human action (as opposed to discourse), Fairclough uses the term to contextualize discourses — social practice then referring to historical, social, political and cultural aspects, as well as social theory. The discourses stand in a dialectical relationship with other elements of social practice, in the sense that discourses shape social practice as well as get shaped by it. CDA is developed as a tool to analyse the relationship between discursive and non-discursive practises.

CDA borrows the term ‘order of discourse’ from Foucault (1971) and defines it as “[...] the socially ordered set of genres and discourses associated with a particular social field [...]” (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999: 58). Fairclough treats ‘order of discourse’ as tied to particular social fields, contrary to Foucault who ties an order of discourse to society at large.

The American and French repertoire theory converged in the book *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology: Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States* from 2000, by Michèle Lamont and Laurent Thévenot. It contains several comparative studies by a range of American and French sociologists, with the notion of “national repertoires of evaluation” framing the analysis. In the introduction to the book, Lamont and Thévenot defines national repertoires of evaluation as

[...] relatively stable schemas of evaluation that are used in varying proportion across national contexts. Each nation makes more readily available to its members specific sets of tools through historical and institutional channels, which means that members of different national communities are not equally likely to draw on the same cultural tools to construct and assess the world that surrounds them (Lamont and Thévenot, 2000: 8–9).¹

Lamont is one of the leading figures in American cultural sociology and Thévenot is, alongside Boltanski, the leading figure of French pragmatic sociology (Blokker, 2011). “[P]ragmatic sociology is primarily concerned with investigating the methods, and more precisely, the practical reasoning and reflexive accounts that people use on a daily basis and that make social life an ongoing, practical accomplishment” (Silber, 2003: 429).

Whereas the focus in Lamont and Thévenot’s approach is on values in evaluation (in France and the US), the focus in the approach that I present is on the language that is used in portraying values, not the values per se. When applying the term, I will therefore only use the first part of it, leaving out the “of evaluation” part.

The main difference between discourse analysis and repertoire theory as related to public discourse is the degree of freedom granted to the actor when engaging in public deliberation. The reason why an analytical perspective positioned within critical theory is combined with an analytical perspective positioned within pragmatic sociology is to emphasize the individual strengths of those perspectives and try to overcome their weaknesses. CDA’s strength as a theory of discourse is its insistence on coupling discourse analysis with other social structures and practices. Its weakness is its heavy linguistic focus and the lack of specifics needed to fully grasp the influence of social structure on the production of discourses (and vice versa). The strength of repertoire theory is the degree of freedom it leaves for the actor, especially as compared to discourse theory. However, repertoire theory is also weak when it comes to linking repertoires to social structure; the theory is too voluntaristic and naïve when it comes to the influence of social structure on action, especially in its American ‘tool kit’ version, as developed by Ann Swidler (1986):

First, [the alternative analysis of culture] offers an image of culture as a ‘tool kit’ of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in vary-

1. Lamont has also written elsewhere on national historical or cultural repertoires (Lamont, 1992: 136–139, 1995).

ing configurations to solve different kinds of problems. Second, to analyze culture's causal effects, it focuses on "strategies of action", persistent ways of ordering action through time. Third, it sees culture's causal significance not in defining ends of action, but in providing cultural components that are used to construct strategies of action (Swidler, 1986: 273).

Swidler (2001) has further developed her repertoire-theory of culture in her book *Talk of Love*. In a review of this book, Lamont (2004) points out weaknesses in Swidler's repertoire-theory in that it does not pay enough attention to social class and social structures, and that it is unclear how one is to empirically determine how a repertoire is created, and where it ends.

A common critique of French pragmatic sociology is that it is too deductive in its approach to empirical analysis, especially in the work of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (1999; 2006). As with the American repertoire theory, French pragmatic sociology also wants to leave more freedom to actors when studying social life. Boltanski (1990), a former student of Bourdieu, labels his approach a sociology of critique, as opposed to Bourdieus critical sociology. Boltanski and Thévenot (1999: 364) writes that

[t]he main problem with critical sociology is its inability to understand the critical operations undertaken by the actors. A sociology which wants to study the critical operations undertaken by actors – a sociology of criticism taken as a specific object- must therefore give up (if only temporarily) the critical stance, in order to recognize the normative principles which underlie the critical activity of ordinary persons.

The most significant contribution to the pragmatic sociology, or the sociology of critique, is Boltanski and Thévenot's (1991, 2006) *De la justification*. In the book, they developed a theory of legitimation and developed a framework consisting of orders of worth and common worlds. Based on empirical analysis and a close reading of political philosophy, they launched six orders of worth related to six common worlds: The Inspired world, The Domestic World, The World of Fame, The Civic World, The Market World, and The Industrial World. The orders of worth are repertoires available for actors engaging in public deliberation. Even though they leave room for the creation of new worlds, this framework is limiting, in the sense that the idea is that the six worlds should guide the researchers when they undertake empirical research.

We suppose that these six worlds are sufficient to describe justification performed in the majority of ordinary situations. But this number is not, of course, a magical one. These worlds are historical constructions and some of them are less and less able to ground people's justifications whereas other ones are merging (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999: 369).

After the publication of *De la Justification*, Boltanski has, together with Ève Chiapello (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005), developed a seventh world labelled "the projective city" (they have substituted the word world for city in this publication, the French word being *cit  *). Boltanski has also pointed out that the Domestic world is less salient than what appears to be the case in *De la Justification*. He says that they were not able to observe, during the creation of the book, that the Domestic World has diminished its influence since the 1968 protests (Basaure 2011).

After reviewing over 30 studies of organizations deploying a Boltanski and Thévenot inspired framework, Søren Jagd (2011) concludes that most of the studies found one or more of the six original orders of worth to be present. The notion of an order of worth can be helpful when engaging in empirical research. However, it is more fruitful to seek to develop a notion of a world, or a normative set of values, on the grounds of the actual analysis, rather than taking a limited number of worlds as a starting point when engaging in empirical research.

A middle position

I am advocating a middle position between the critical/ideological/discourse and the repertoire/pragmatic/tool-kit approach, in line with the efforts of Michael Schudson (1989) and William Sewell (1992), amongst others, both inspired by Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration. Fairclough can also be said to inhabit a middle position in that he gives the actors a degree of freedom within the discourses, with his dialectical relationship between discursive and other social practices, in terms of the actor engaging in discursive practice not being totally determined by the social structure. Nevertheless, he still positions himself within a critical theory tradition.

According to the framework launched in this article, the historical, social, political and cultural traditions within a specific country will constitute the national repertoire. The national cultural repertoire will constitute the possible rhetorical content of the discourses that are active in the discussions of any topic within a national context. Discourses can then 'be filled' with a slightly different rhetoric in

different countries, as it is more or less strategically adapted to the national context and its available cultural repertoire. The notion of rhetoric that is employed in this framework is a 'classic' definition dating back to Aristotle (1926: 25), who defined rhetoric as "[...] the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatsoever". Rhetoric is about persuading others of one's standpoint using the means one has at hand. The means at hand will then be limited by the available discourses of the discursive order. The actors can be somewhat pragmatic in their relationship to discourses within an order; it is possible for actors to draw strategically on discourses according to the context they are in.

Providing the actors with such an amount of freedom in their discursive practice also opens up the possibility for moving from one subject position to another if perceived as beneficial. Most of the time we will be 'assigned' a subject position by the ideological dimension of a particular discourse, in an Althusserian way:

[...] ideology 'functions' in such a way that it [...] 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!' (Althusser, 1999: 320–321).

However, the theory of interpellation is too deterministic; it is possible to inhabit and move between subject positions on a conscious-strategic level, as evident from empirical studies of the debate on the future of public service broadcasting (Larsen, 2011a), as well as studies of cultural debates in other settings (Larsen, 2008). If we consider the actors as drawing on the national cultural repertoire in an unconscious way, then we could say that the repertoire is part of the actors' mental schemata, and activated in automatic cognition (DiMaggio, 1997). But if we on the other hand consider them to be strategic, then the national cultural repertoire can be viewed as a cultural tool kit. The repertoire will for the most part work on an unconscious level, but it is possible to relate to it strategically.

In discussions of similar topics in different national cultures, discourses can be filled with slightly different rhetorical content, as a consequence of the national cultural repertoire that is available for the actors engaging in discursive practices. Actors can inhabit different subject positions within the available discourses and activate different rhetoric, depending on their position. A similar subject position within a similar discourse in two different countries, however, might end up with slightly different rhetoric, which is documented empirically in the study of public service broadcasting (Larsen, 2011a).

To speak in Habermasian terms: when engaging in communicative action in the public sphere, the strength of an argument will not only depend on its truth in relation to the objective world, its rightness in relation to the social world or its sincerity in relation to the subjective world (Habermas, 1984: 99–100), but also on its resonance with the national cultural repertoire. In a study of how public service broadcasting is legitimated in Norway and Sweden, I found that there are similar values attached to the institutions in both countries. For example, in the white papers on public service broadcasting and overall cultural policy, the need to secure a national culture, a vibrant democracy and an inclusive public sphere is emphasized in both countries (Larsen 2011b). These are values traditionally attributed to such media institutions. However, the values are expressed differently, in that the Swedish rhetoric is generally more principled and philosophical than the Norwegian when arguing for the importance of public service broadcasting. In Sweden, the importance of the idea of public service broadcasting and how this is more important than ever in a digitized age is emphasized,² while the Norwegian legitimization rhetoric is more concrete and pragmatic, centered on technical issues and NRK's role in the preservation of the Norwegian languages (Larsen 2010, 2011b), amongst other things. On this ground it can be argued that the Swedes are more in line with the rest of Europe: "The attention focused on the mission of public service broadcasters is greater than ever before, both at the level of European and national regulators, and at the level of the public broadcasting institutions themselves" (Bardoel and d'Hae-nens, 2008, p. 342–343).

It makes sense to think of this as the social worlds representing a similar normative context in the two countries due to a common history and a shared social democratic tradition (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Sejersted, 2005; Stråth, 2005), and the language of the context taking different forms due to differences in the historically constituted national cultural repertoire. Sweden has a stronger tradition for elitism and high culture than Norway, as a consequence of Sweden having been a dominant country in Scandinavia for centuries. Norway, on the other hand, has been part of both Denmark and Sweden until 1905. When Norway was under the Danish crown (1380–1814), most of the intellectual life and the state administration were located in Copenhagen, the Danish capital. As a

2. As an illustration, the government proposition on public service broadcasting is titled "More important than ever. Public service broadcasting 2007–2012" (Prop. 2005/06: 112).

result, Norway does not have a long tradition for having an intellectual elite. These historical differences seem to have resulted in differences in the national repertoires when it comes to level of abstraction and principled rhetoric in public deliberation.³

Being-in-the-world as a National Citizen

When applying a discourse approach it is often as interesting to be able to say something about that which is not articulated as that which is, or about “saying” rather than “speaking”: ”Saying’ designates the existential constitution, whereas ‘speaking’ indicates the mundane aspect which lapses into the empirical. Hence the first determination of saying is not speaking but rather the couple of hearing/keeping silent” (Ricœur, 1981: 58). These are terms originating from Heidegger (1962: 206), who states that “hearing is constitutive of discourse”. To get in touch with the “saying”-dimension of a national debate, one would benefit from conducting a national comparative study of the articulation of a specific theme, as this will help pinpoint what is not articulated in speech. Heidegger defines discourse as “[...] the ‘meaningful’ articulation of the understandable structure of being-in-the-world” (Heidegger, 1927: 161; cited in Ricœur, 1981: 58). For Heidegger, being comes before discourse. He is concerned with the meaning of being and treats the world as “the other”. He ends up with the term “being-in-the-world” as a concept for the existential condition of being.

The national repertoire can be considered a part of the existential condition of the citizens of a particular country (although this should not be overstated, as the existential condition of course consists of more aspects than the national repertoire, e.g. humans have a lot in common across national borders). It therefore makes sense to think of “being” as slightly different within national cultures. On these grounds, I add the phrase “as a national citizen” to the notion of “being-in-the-world”. The term then becomes a description of the existential condition of being of a particular nation, and is meant to capture the mental schemata (DiMaggio, 1997) of being brought up in, or into, the culture of a particular nation state. Being-in-the-world as a national citizen (BWNC) will then influence the discourses that are produced. BWNC is a theoretical concept useful in national comparative studies

3. Similar conclusions have been drawn in other comparative studies of public discourse in Norway and Sweden (Gomard and Krogstad, 2001).

of public debate, as it captures how being brought up in a particular culture influences how one articulates the world through discourse.

In the particular case drawn upon in this article, one would presume that being-in-the-world as a Norwegian would be quite similar to that of being-in-the-world as a Swede, considering what they have in common historically, politically and socially (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Sejersted, 2005; Stråth, 2005). The empirical analysis, however, shows that this might not be so: As already mentioned, the Swedish rhetoric is generally more principled and philosophical than the Norwegian in arguing for the importance of public service broadcasting. This may be interpreted as the BWNC of Sweden influencing the Swedish actors in portraying the discourses differently than the BWNC of Norway influences the Norwegian actors: It is more accepted, and sometimes even demanded, that one in Sweden “breaks out” of egalitarian ideals on a cultural level and activates a more abstract and philosophical (or elitist) rhetoric. Socially, there is a strong emphasis on egalitarian values in both countries, culminating in the social democratic welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990). But it is more accepted, and also a demand for, a philosophical and principled rhetoric in Sweden – a rhetoric that would probably be perceived as misplaced by a Norwegian public. The different actors partaking in the debate of course have different interests, and representing various institutions and organizations (such as the Government, the Ministry of Culture, political parties, the public service broadcasters, commercial broadcasters, newspapers, the general public etc.), but they are nevertheless influenced by BWNC of their respective country prior to entering the debate and positioning themselves within a discourse. The term BWNC is developed on the grounds of an analysis of public debates (Larsen, 2011a) and is meant to serve as a tool to capture national differences in how similar issues are framed and discussed.

BWNC is close to Elias’s (1996) term *national habitus*.⁴ However, BWNC has a more specific focus than Elias’s (2000) term, which refers to behaviours and practices in a whole range of situations, and how this changes with a nation’s civilizing process.

4. By ‘habitus’ – a word he used long before its popularization by Pierre Bourdieu – Elias basically means ‘second nature’ or ‘embodied social learning’. [...] [I]t is used in large part to overcome the problems of the old notion of ‘national character’ as something fixed and static. Thus Elias contends that ‘the fortunes of a nation over the centuries become sedimented into the habitus of its individual members’, and it follows from this that habitus changes over time precisely because the fortunes and experiences of a nation (or of its constituent groupings) continue to change and accumulate. A balance between continuity and change is involved [...] (Dunning and Mennell, 1996: ix).

Figure 1 visualizes how the different terms discussed relate to each other.

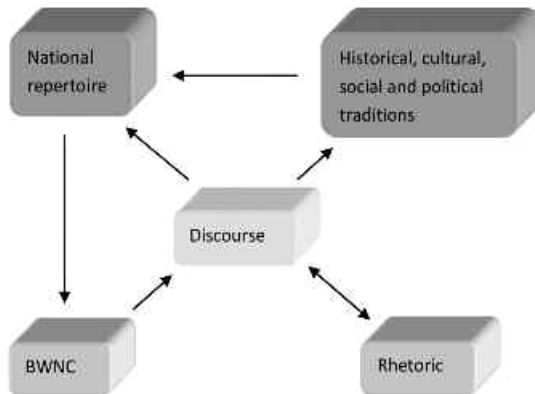


Figure 1

Historical, cultural, social and political traditions help constitute the national repertoire. These are all at the macro level. BWNC and rhetoric, on the other hand, are at the micro level. In between these we find discourse, which is at the meso level. BWNC and rhetoric are related to the actions of actors. Rhetoric is about persuading someone of your argument while BWNC is something that the actors do not treat reflexively – “Many schemata [...] enact widely held scripts that appear independent of individual experience” (DiMaggio, 1997: 273). BWNC influences how one sees and articulates the world in discourse. This approach can be said to be opposite of Foucault’s (1969, 1971) notion of discourse,⁵ in which the subject is created through discourse. In the approach developed, I rely on Heidegger’s treatment of the relationship between being and discourse (the former being a prerequisite for the latter), but at the same time treat discourse as more of a ‘macro structure’, existing at a higher level of abstraction than the concrete speech of the actors, discourse then being at the meso level. The discourse is being articulated by actors situated in a world influenced by the national repertoire, which is constituted by the nation’s history, and its social, cultural and political traditions. The discourse

5. Foucault is often credited as the ‘inventor’ of discourse analysis, as it is used in the social sciences.

produced can in turn influence the traditions of the country, or how one talks and thinks about the traditions, leading to changes in the national repertoire. This can again influence being-in-the-world as a (particular) national citizen.

Both the historical, cultural, social and political traditions and the national repertoire are at the social practice level in a Faircloughian perspective. In the framework launched in this article, the traditions are social structures that manifest themselves in possible ways of framing issues, as well as possible issues to frame, in the form of a national repertoire. Issues that are never debated might then make up such a central part of the national repertoire that they never get articulated, or the opposite, they are at the outskirts of the repertoire and considered inappropriate to discuss. The national repertoire influences discourses concerning specific topics (discourses within a discursive order), and the discourses can in turn influence the national repertoire as well as the social, political and cultural traditions, although these take a long time to change. The work of social movements such as the gay and women's rights movements have proven effective in changing both the national repertoire – pushing the discriminatory language to the outskirts of the repertoire – and the politics related to the issue.

When conducting a comparative analysis of the articulation of a specific topic, the discourses analysed will be activated by concrete actors' (be they interviewees, authors of documents or actors deliberating in small group settings or in the media) being-in-the-world as national citizens. The national repertoire's influence on the discourses will then go through citizens being-in-the-world, and the national repertoire will always be articulated through discourse. The dialectical relationship between social and discursive practice, as emphasized by Fairclough, is thus a part of this approach as well. The same goes for the dialectical relationship between discursive practice and text, the difference being that the term text is substituted with the term rhetoric. By using the term text, one places a heavy focus on the actual cultural object that is produced by and produces discourse. By using the term rhetoric, one instead opens up the micro level to analysis of interacting subjects in an interview or a public setting. Furthermore, the arguments that are activated in trying to persuade the audience are the focus of analysis, rather than more technical linguistic terms. In this way, the approach is more suitable for social scientists than Fairclough's (2003) model, which is deeply entrenched in a linguistic tradition. Although social practice is an important part of Fairclough's model, thus making it relevant for sociology, still most analysis employing the framework says little about social practice.

Rhetoric is used by actors operating within a discourse. Most of the time the rhetoric will follow from the dominant discourse(s) in the discursive order, but it is possible to strategically employ a specific rhetoric, as it is adapted to local con-

texts. The terms BWNC and rhetoric are processes connected to meaning-making ‘on the ground’ (Spillman, 2002), while repertoire and discourse are part of the wider repertoire of possible framings, discourse being at the meso level. We need this meso level in the framework because both repertoire and rhetoric are enacted through discourse. Discourse connects the macro and micro levels.

The content of the national repertoire is something that must be determined empirically, as is also the case with the discourses and their corresponding logic, as well as the rhetoric employed by concrete actors. BWNC, on the other hand, is a purely theoretical concept that cannot be operationalised empirically. It is simply a term that is useful for thinking, as it conceptualizes how a national repertoire influences the rhetoric employed in discursive practice. The term captures how national repertoire influences how one articulates the world in discourse, as a result of being socialized into a particular national culture.

Conclusion

I have now presented an analytical framework for national comparative studies of public debate. The framework consists of a combination of Fairclough’s CDA, repertoire theory (represented by the notion of a national cultural repertoire), and rhetoric. I argue that the overall framework of CDA is a good tool for empirical analysis of public debate, but it will be strengthened by substituting the term ‘text’ with ‘rhetoric’, in a three-folded model, where the social practice in Fairclough’s terminology manifests itself in a national cultural repertoire. The framework is also coupled with Heidegger’s philosophy, and I introduce the term being-in-the-world as a national citizen (BWNC), to capture how being socialized into a national culture influences how we articulate the world in discourse. The concept of a national cultural repertoire conceptualizes the social practice in Fairclough’s model, and the BWNC connects the social practice with the discursive practice. The approach has been illustrated with examples from an empirical analysis of the public debate about the future of public service broadcasting in Norway and Sweden, showing that the values ascribed to the media institution are shared in both countries, but that the language used in portraying the value varies. This is due to differences in the national repertoire, which again influences the BWNC of the two countries.

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